

She's the undiminished force, a voice that's abundantly god-gifted. And the *awaaz* has gained strength and suppleness over the decades. If I had to pick a voice to carry with me on a cassette/CD to a desert island, it would be hers. Not Madonna, not Celine Dion, not Mariah Carey.

Yes, for sure, the voice would be Bhosle's, Asha Bhosle's.

Interviewing her is as crunchy as the *karara murgh mussallam* lunch she serves. Craving both helpings—meaning Ms AB talking live and the delectious lunch—I repair to her Peddar Road apartment for a *parlez s'il vous* lunch plate on a weekday noon. And without holding on ceremony, I ask...

Seems you've just composed songs for a private album called *Aapki Asha*.

Yes, nine songs. I didn't sit and compose the tunes on a harmonium or something, but the tunes would just come. For instance, I'd find myself humming while being driven in my car, up and down the city.

My daughter (Varsha) had suggested that I should compose songs in the style of Sajjad *saab*. He's legendary... but I couldn't even dare to think of copying anyone. For good or bad, the songs are strictly my own...which means *sab style ke gaane hain...* a *ghazal*, a sad song, a love song, a peppy song, the works!

The songs were arranged by Tapun who's such a gifted boy. I'd met him while doing the remixed album *Songs of My Soul*.

How can you like remixes?

(After a pause) I like them because remixes even revive the compositions of music directors who were in form 30 years ago. Otherwise the past will disappear. Songs which were recorded mono are now accessible to the new generation in listener-friendly, updated stereophonic sound.

That's why the R.D. Burman magic is still so alive and kicking. His *Sona re sona re (Teesri Manzil)* and *Piya tu ab to aaja (Caravan)* were originally composed in the pop groove. With the remixes, they've got a new audience, including three-and-four-year-old children. The vintage songs have received a new lease of life and are even played non-stop at discos.

Okay, now tell me, what makes you angry?

The anger has faded. Of course, I still have this habit of speaking the plain truth and nothing but the truth. But there was a time when I used my anger to fight injustice. I'd blurt out the first thing which came to mind.

Now there's no need to be so *moonh phat*. I've gone through hell for a major part of my life, it's been like a 20-reel film full of pain and drama. Now I've come to terms with the pain, I'm at peace with myself and quite chilled out.

Which was the most painful phase?

There were far too many painful phases. Where do I start? Now everything seems so good and orderly... but there was this day when I left everything, left my house only with the clothes I was wearing. There I was standing on the road, alone, not knowing where to go next.

After that, from 1960 to today, I've somehow succeeded in standing on my own two feet. I had to bring up my three children. I took on whichever songs came my way from whichever composer, whether he was a maestro or a rank newcomer.

Has the tag of being the No. 1 or No. 2 singer bothered you?

How can you say whether the sun or the moon is No. 1? Who's bigger—Tata or Birla?

You haven't been bugged by the lifelong comparison to Lata Mangeshkar?

Why compare me to anyone? I don't think either *didi* or I can be compared to each other, whether it is in the way we sang yesterday or today.

I haven't even BEEN
HONoured with the
Padmashri. I've NEVER had
A LOBBY canvassing for me

How would you describe the difference in your voices?

I feel, *didi's* voice is thin. Compared to hers, my voice is heavier. But we can both take our voices to the highest scales. Her voice is undoubtedly sweet.

Frankly, half the people like *didi's* voice and half the people like my voice. We have a separate niche. In the past, those who tried to imitate us and still insisted that they had a third kind of voice, have vanished into oblivion. If I'd simply imitated *didi's* voice, I'm sure I would have vanished too.

Didi loved Noor Jahan's style but there's a major difference between their voices, in their *sur* and modulation. Noor Jahan was *didi's* ideal, but *didi ne phat se apna* style change *kar diya*, she established her distinctive stamp.

It's widely felt that your voice is at the peak of its prowess today.

Are you insinuating that *didi's* voice isn't? Look there's a four-year difference between us and that's it. I'm 68 but feel 25. All of us have to face the march of age and time, like wrinkles are bound to show up on the face. Still, I don't think anyone, including myself, can shake her from her supreme position where she is still standing. When I heard her recently-recorded *alaaps* for Uttam Singh, I was amazed... how does she do it?

Yeah, so how do you still do the teenybopper *Le gayee le gayee*?

Hanh woh gaana to chulbula hai, bahut Asha Bhosle type *hai*.

In a way, then, Lata *didi* is docile and you're *chulbili*?

See, *didi* has always been delicate, physically and also heart-wise. She's softspoken. Of course, she does get irritated occasionally and raises her voice like all human beings... and then only heaven can help you. She's never looked after the daily household chores, dusted the furniture, cooked away in the kitchen or changed the nappies of kids. Maybe because I've gone through all that, I'm more *bindaas* and active.

Do you think Lata *didi* should have married?

No, I would never say that in front of her or behind her back. In fact, I believe no artiste should get married. If the woman is more well-known than the man, the husband develop a massive complex. *Aur life bikhar si jaati hai*.

How would you look back on your second marriage to R.D.Burman?

Music was the basic foundation of our marriage.

The foundation was our common love for music, be it Ali Akbar Khan or the Beatles. R.D. would emerge from his bath at 9.30 a.m. and sometimes till 3 p.m. we'd be listening and humming to Coltrane's jazz records or to the brand-new albums of Earth Wind and Fire, Shirley Bassey, Sergio Mendes and Santana.

Did you ever spat with him for assigning a song after your heart to another playback singer?

One doesn't fight over music. I'd help him any which way. Like *didi* wasn't available for an urgent recording of *Zehreela Insaan*... so I dubbed for her... later the song was recorded in her voice... it was *didi's* song after all.

For *Rudaali*, too, I helped out with a song which was later recorded by her. But I've only done this for *didi* and in the past, whenever Kishore Kumar or Mohammed Rafi requested me to help out in an emergency.

And what about *Mere watan ke logon*?

Oh woh to kitni purani baat ho gayee hai. You can't alter time.

Today R.D.Burman is constantly praised. But during his lifetime...

Dukh hota hai aisi baaton se. Mozart died

unsung and now millions flock to his grave. R.D. didn't get his dues during his lifetime but he will be remembered forever...I guess he was at least 50 years ahead of his time.

Which other music personalities, do you feel didn't get their just dues during their lives?

Majrooh *saab* (Sultanpuri) should have certainly got more than he did. Then there was (lyricist) S.H.Bihari who didn't get the acclaim that he deserved.

You haven't been honoured by the government yet. How come?

Don't ask me, I don't know. I haven't even been honoured with the Padmashri. I guess I've never had a lobby canvassing for me.

I've won two National Awards for the Best Singer (*Umrao Jaan, Ijaazat*) and eight *Filmfare* Awards. If I hadn't retired from the *Filmfare* Awards, I'm sure I would have got another 10-12 trophies by now. Know where those *Filmfare* trophies are? They're on display in Dubai's Planet Hollywood. Must get them back soon.

(Traffic sounds rise) How come you can relate to music and peace in such a noisy apartment?

Kya karoon? I've been here for nearly 30 years. I've become accustomed to the noise. I need people, my family and noise around me. I'm scared of si-



Which has been the happiest day in your life?

Obviously the day my first child Hemant was born in 1949. At the age of five, he was sent off to the Doon boarding school. How I howled my eyes out.

Which was the first song you ever recorded?

A Marathi song... *Chala chala maaza nava bala* in 1943. But *Gore gore haathon mein* (*Parineeta*) was my first hit while the songs of *Naya Daur* brought me wide recognition.

Which have been the most difficult songs to sing?

Saakiya aaj mujhe (*Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam*), *Maang mein bhar ke rang sabhi* (*Mujhe Jeene Do*), the *qawwali* from *Taj Mahal*, *Daiya yeh*

No artiste SHOULD get
MARRIED. If the woman is
more well-known THAN the
MAN, the husband
develops a MASSIVE complex

lence. I want to be surrounded by people. My mother-in-law was here with me...till she passed away at the age of 100. Peace of mind has to be within you, not around you.

Do you like staying next door to didi?

Yeah, that's great. *Apna to apna hi hota hai*. I don't dream about a bigger apartment or a bungalow by the sea. *Chaddar dekhke pair badhane chahiye*. Mercifully, god has given me plenty of everything—he gave me plenty of *sukh* the way he gave me plenty of *dukh*. Asha Bhosle *bhi usine banaya*.

Right. Now tell me, why do you sound somewhat out of sorts and subdued on the Adnan Sami album *Kabhi Nazar To Milao*?

He mixed the album, so he should know. It was recorded five to six years ago. He was married to Zeba (Bakhtiar) then, I believe now he is Toronto-based. He recorded some songs and spread them through two albums. I'm not satisfied with the way my voice has been used on the album, I thought there would be at least one solo number of mine. Yes, I'm disappointed by the way my voice has been used.

I asked what makes you angry... what makes you happy?

Small things like saree shopping. Whenever I'm depressed, I run to Kala Niketan and look through hundreds of sarees.

main kahan aa phasi (*Caravan*) and *O meri jaan* (*The Train*)... and all the cabaret songs like *Mera naam hai Shabnam* (*Kati Patang*) given to me by Pancham... they seemed *halke-phulke* but they weren't, far from it.

And of course there have been songs which I have just refused to sing. Once when I was asked to sing a number with vulgar lyrics, I walked out of the studio. The musicians had signalled to me quietly that I shouldn't even touch the number... which was sweet of them. Do you know they have a certain image of me? Once I went to a recording studio in a *salwar kameez* and they were horrified... because they're so used to seeing me in a saree.

Last question. Do you believe singers are born, not made?

I'd say they are born. *Didi* and I have inherited our voices from our father (Dinanath Mangeshkar) whose *keertans* were so extraordinary.

On the other hand, (music director) Shankar would be very hoity-toity about *anpadh* singers. He'd say Sharada is a BA graduate. And I'd say fine but get me a graduate who's a Lata or Rafi. I could just pass the fourth standard in a Marathi school. Ironically, I have three honorary degrees now. Really, what more could I expect of life?

Khalid Mohamed